

Are you familiar with the principal espoused by the 18th century German philosopher Georg Hegel? Hegel said that all of life is a process that involves thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Something is created, something rises up to oppose this creation, and out of the struggle between the two there is a new creation. The principal can be described in other terms, for instance, construction, de-construction, reconstruction. And then, of course, for those of us who are followers of Jesus, there is a very particular language that describes this same rhythm or process.

We talk about birth, and about death, and about resurrection. This is the great paschal cycle, and these are the themes that we constantly encounter as we move along on the journey of life. And since that journey is so intensely personal and so different for each of us, each of us is left to sort out, and define and deal with those themes based on how life is unfolding for us. In one sense it's a very private process, and no one can define the themes for us, but the readings for these Sundays leading up to the season of Advent remind us that those themes of birth, death and resurrection go beyond the boundaries of our own personal spiritual pilgrimage. They are corporate, cosmic themes, and they have to be sorted out and defined and dealt with by the entire global community.

And so this morning as we listen to these readings we listen with ears that have been influenced by a very personal set of circumstances, but we also listen with the realization that we don't listen alone. We listen as members of a community, and ultimately that community includes every human being on the face of the earth.

The Old Testament reading and the Gospel reading this morning are both examples of apocalyptic literature, and even though these two readings are separated by a huge span of time, they are surprisingly similar. That's because apocalyptic literature always follows a formula that dictates its

shape. Apocalyptic literature is always dualistic in its description of two opposing cosmic powers. Those powers are God and Satan, or some equivalent of evil named in another way. There are also two different time periods represented in this kind of literature. The first is the present, temporal, troubled age where evil seems to be overwhelming God's beleaguered people. The second is a future, perfect, eternal age where God rules and where the righteous are blessed. The readings from Daniel and Mark both follow that formula, and both are born out of very specific situations.

In Daniel the writer was influenced by the oppression of the Israelites by the ruler Antiochus and the Seleucids, and in an attempt to encourage and reassure the people, the author looks to the future when the oppressor will be overthrown and God will claim God's kingdom and restore God's people.

As you can imagine, this message was a source of great hope for the people who heard it. The same thing is true for the message in Mark's Gospel. That message was influenced by the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D. This was a time of tremendous communal disintegration for the Jews, and in response to that disintegration the author of this Gospel records Jesus telling his listeners to be prepared for the future, and to look for the time when God will come in glory to claim God's chosen people.

Both of these messages were delivered during times when there was good reason to doubt that the future would ever arrive. There were terrible signs and events that made it seem unrealistic to even consider the possibility of a future. In that situation where the horizon was darkened by the horrible black clouds of destruction and disintegration and death, the apocalyptic writer communicated the vision of a future age, a better time where life would go on and where the rule of God would not be threatened or undone.

And now, in our own time new clouds have darkened the horizon, haven't they? In our families, in our civic community, in our church, in our nation and internationally, if we are willing to see and hear and feel, we are being confronted by difficult, painful issues that make us wonder what the future will hold, or might even make us wonder if there will even be a future.

One of the clouds I am aware of, a cloud that threatens to block the light from the sun and moon for so many people in our nation is the cloud of violence — family violence and street violence. Homes and schoolyards and streets have been turned into battlefields where the air is filled with terror and rage. That atmosphere is scarring young people for life, and the experts are telling us that things will only get worse, because children who grow up in the midst of violence become violent adults, and they produce violent children who become violent adults, and on and on and on.

But as followers of Jesus we are called to embrace and to manifest another vision, a vision of hope, the hope for a new age where education and publicity, and cooperation and common sense will break the chain and show violent people another way — an age where all people will come to realize that solutions can be found by talking things out and by compromising and by reasoning with one another — an age when we will all acknowledge that any act of violence against another person has its roots in ignorance or frustration or fear, and it wounds us all. You and I are called to live out that hope and to work to make the vision of that new age a reality.

There other dark clouds that threaten to blot out the light, traumas that come into our lives, the loss of a job that makes us question our abilities and self-worth, catastrophic illness that causes the visible ebbing of life, hour by hour, the tearing of a relationship that leaves us feeling angry and hurt, the reckless behavior of a teenager that rips at the fabric of the entire family, news of terrorist massacres like the ones in Paris that shake the foundations of civilized society.

Some people would say that's just the way life is, you know? That's the way life is, and the thing to do is to get through it the best we can.

But as a people of faith you and I are called to another vision, a vision of hope. The hope for an age where the time of unemployment could become a time for the clarification of priorities and a deeper self-knowledge and a greater appreciation for family and friends — an age where the time of catastrophic illness could become a time for spiritual and interpersonal growth — an age where intentional efforts and a sincere desire could bring about the healing of relationships and memories — a new age where the time of living through those reckless teenage years could become a time of diminishing influence in order to allow for the emergence of a capable, responsible adult — an age where even as our hearts are breaking at the news of new acts of senseless brutality we commit ourselves to a deepened life of prayer and affirm our solidarity with peace seekers around the world.

It's true, we live in troubled, troubling times, and that's why it is so important for us to embrace and manifest the vision of another age. That is why it is so important to remind ourselves and the doubting world around us that our God reigns.

We have not been left to despair as those without hope. At the very center of our identity as a people of faith is our vocation as a people of hope, and we have good reason to live fully into that vocation. Jesus has said to us, "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age." Matthew 28:20. And we have been reassured by this promise: "I will not leave you helpless, but I will send my own Spirit, and my Spirit will teach you all things and remind you of all that I have said." John 14:18ff

In light of this reassurance and promise, this is our goal: To communicate hope and to affirm the never-failing presence and provision of God. The sacramental life we share in this place witnesses to that hope and belief.

When we celebrate the Eucharist, when we welcome new members through Baptism, when we celebrate and bless a marriage, even when we bury our dead, we say to ourselves and to the world, "We have hope, and God is with us." Whatever else happens, whatever threatens to drag us down or tear us apart, we affirm in Jesus Christ that we are not a people without hope.

Today we celebrate that hope, and we look with great expectation to the dawning of a new age, an age when all of God's children will join in one world-wide chorus. That is the age that is just over the horizon and beyond the dark clouds. Our task and our joy as followers of Jesus is to look and to point beyond the clouds.

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